

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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<http://www.house.gov/science/welcome.htm>

August 29, 2006

Dr. Michael D. Griffin
Administrator
National Aeronautics and Space Administration
300 E. Street, SW
Washington, DC 20546

Dear Administrator Griffin:

I am writing in response to the recent developments concerning the NASA Advisory Council (NAC). In doing so, I do not dispute your right to select the members and structure for the NAC that you consider to be most responsive to your needs. That said, I am troubled by actions that—rightly or wrongly—leave a perception of an unwillingness of NASA senior management to listen to advice that runs counter to what they want to hear. This may be an unfair perception, but it could become widespread and long-lasting if left unaddressed.

In your July 6, 2006, remarks to the science subcommittees of the NAC, you stated *"One of the great strengths of our country is the principle of freedom of speech, of entertaining vigorous debates on the great issues of the day. For NASA, the great issue before us is how we carry out our nation's civil space program—in space science and human spaceflight—and our aeronautics research programs."* I agree wholeheartedly with your assessment—such debates over NASA's future direction and implementation of its programs are both necessary and healthy. Contrast that statement, however, with your August 21 communication to the NAC: *"The most appropriate recourse for NAC members who believe the NASA program should be something other than what it is, is to resign."* It is difficult for an outside observer to read that statement and not see it as an attempt to discourage dissenting views by NAC members, whether on issues related to science, aeronautics, or even to the implementation of the human exploration initiative.

I do not believe it is in your or the agency's interest to foster a public perception that you only seek advisors who are prepared to endorse your plans and positions and are not interested in constructive criticism or alternatives to those plans and positions. Moreover, if the NAC membership is seen as a captive body, it will inevitably lose credibility in the eyes of Congress and other decision-makers, and any recommendations the NAC might make will wind up being discounted in advance.

Dr. Griffin, there are significant issues facing the agency. I do not doubt your commitment to working hard to leave NASA a better agency than you found it. In that regard, over the years I have found that good, independent advice and criticism—while unpleasant at times—can be enormously helpful to achieving the right outcomes to vexing policy questions. That is one of the reasons I find the current controversy surrounding the NAC to be of concern. To an interested observer, the actions taken by you and the NAC Chair seem counterproductive with respect to the goal of getting the high-quality, independent advice that you will need. I would welcome a clarification from you regarding your reasons for the steps you have taken, and I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Bart Gordon". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Bart" and last name "Gordon" clearly distinguishable.

BART GORDON
Ranking Member